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ABSTRACT

The author conceptualizes recurrent education as organized, structured, institutionally sponsored learning activities with intentional outcomes, which are distributed over the life span of the individual in a recurring way. Some problems to which recurrent education proposes solutions include: alienation at the inter-generational level, institutionalization of students, and blocking of young adults from the work force during a critical life-state. The author suggests a more equitable education system to include: a basic education or common competency base at the elementary level, provision of job-entry skills to all students at age 16 at the secondary level, and further secondary or higher education from an "educational drawing account" guaranteed to the individual at later stages of his/her life cycle. Implications for education are the linking up of academic/professional, vocational/technical, and adult/social mainstreams. Major problems of the concept include existing inertia in education and employment, implementation of the notion of equity, and the lack of conceptual or practical limits. Although elements of recurrent education are currently emerging and developing, it is unlikely that parents would accept the student control necessary to truly actualize the idea of providing equity through equalized opportunity. (EA)

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RECURRENT EDUCATION:

"APPLE PIE" ...OR... "ATOMIC BOMB"?

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RECURRENT EDUCATION

"Recurrent Education" is a term which has been used with increasing frequency over the past five years, and is likely to be appearing soon in legislation in the Province of British Columbia, as well as at the national level. Study Committees under the sponsorship of the Provinces, the Federal Government, various national governments in Europe, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have also been working on problems of implementation.

The concept seems to appeal to, and has been endorsed by, a diverse constituency. Politicians, labour union officials and negotiators, adult educators, social scientists, and futurologists can be counted among the supporters of this trend. Obviously, an idea uniting such a diverse group of supporters deserves careful examination, not only because of its possible importance, but also because of the likelihood that each group is hearing only those aspects which appeal to them, and is ignoring the longer term problems and/or detriments.

Its assumptions include acceptance of the fact that learning is a lifelong process; that access to schooling should be a part of that process; that people and society benefit from the mixing and interchange of work, leisure, and learning; that access to schooling should be a result of personal and social decisions; and that the formal education system is basically needed by our society, and is modifiable in the direction of greater social equity and personal satisfaction.

This document results from opportunities to read and discuss materials relating to Recurrent Education with a number of people from different European Countries, as well as Canadians from a number of Provinces.

For the purposes of this commentary, Recurrent Education is defined as "... the distribution of education over the life span of the individual in a recurring way. This means a break with the present practice of a long, uninterrupted pre-work period of full time schooling, which has been described as a 'front end' model." (Recurrent Education, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, O.E.C.D., Paris, 1973). Furthermore, education in this context is taken to mean schooling - organized, structured, institutionally sponsored learning activities with intentional outcomes.

There seem to be two sources for the notion of "Recurrent Education". On the one hand, there is an acceptance of education as being a primary means of providing for the individual, opportunities for social, economic, and cultural betterment. On the other hand, there is concern with the maldistribution of such opportunities. Obviously, these are closely connected - the system is viewed as not achieving for individuals or the society-at-large the results expected.

Most criticisms of the education system or parts of that system tend to take the stance that the education enterprise as presently represented throughout the industrialized world is characterized by general inadequacy and decreasing relevance, coupled with rising costs and social dissatisfaction.

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RECURRENT EDUCATION

There seems also to be agreement that continued linear expansion of the present system will not serve to correct its inadequacies, and in fact, may even further exacerbate them.

One can identify three schools of thought regarding alternative desirable futures for publicly supported education:

Ivan Illichs' solution of junking the total system (de-schooling society);

the extreme adult education approach of turning the world into a classroom (education permanente); or

a third alternative represented by Recurrent Education.

This third approach is one that its advocates argue can provide on the one hand, a strategy for modifying the existing system gradually in tune with social changes and needs, and on the other hand, a set of ideals remarkably similar to those enunciated for the adult education enterprise - that is, maximum fulfillment of the individual through, and with, freedom of choice throughout life.

The problems to which Recurrent Education proposes solutions are as varied as the hopes and aspirations that are engendered by the education system.

A. Lengthened amounts of schooling to the 11 or 12 year level on a mass basis throughout most industrial countries of the Western World has not brought to students a concomitant increase in personal satisfaction or access to money, power, or position - the driving motivations used on a mass basis to "sell" the idea of increased schooling. The best predictor of future position, power or status continues to be, for most people, their family - rather than the number of years that they attended school.

B. The greatly increased amount of schooling undergone by the young has tended to increase the social distance between generations. This is being felt acutely in Europe, and at an intuitive level, to a considerable degree here in British Columbia as evidenced by increasing outcries over the discrepancy between school curricula and parental beliefs and expectations.

C. There has been growing revolt for fifteen years over the "pipeline" of mandatory education, a socially enforced work and consumption ethic, regimented leisure, and forced retirement. In this context, a "front end loaded" education system is viewed as conditioner of robots rather than as a vehicle for self-actualization of the individual.

D. Lengthening compulsory schooling and post secondary education programs are resulting in a higher and higher number of young people becoming institutionalized or dependent upon the educational system for indefinite periods of time - a process working directly in opposition to the purported goals of education in freeing the individual.

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E. Increasing rates of change in technical fields upon which our society is dependent coupled with lengthening programs of training and education pose an absurd pattern for the future. Society has not the right to claim years of an individual's life for a return of a decreasing number of years of work before obsolescence sets in, nor does the student have the right to claim that large a social investment. In summary, the present pattern implies our total resources being used up in training people for jobs that will have vanished or changed completely before the students occupy them.

F. There is a dawning perception that the education system as a whole operates most effectively in assisting the children of those who already have the most knowledge and power. Statements have been made by some European educators that there is the possibility of a revulsion on the part of the working classes against the entire system of tax-supported post-elementary schooling as the people who are paying the most are not getting the value out of the system. Middle and upper class people use the school system for their children and themselves to its utmost, but the ones who pay the bulk of the taxes are those people who use the system the least.

G. There continues to be a strong connection between the number of years of traditional academic post-secondary schooling and future social and economic power. In other words, the number of years of training of an M.D. and a Master Mechanic are equivalent, and the depth and complexity of knowledge required are likely similar. The critical difference in future pay and social position in the life of the mechanical apprentice and the medical student lies primarily in the number of years of formal education required prior to engaging in the training program.

H. Lengthening years of mandatory or socially enforced education has resulted in inflation of the total number of years of schooling everyone engages in rather than an equalizing of educational opportunities. It could be argued that the primary beneficiary of this inflation has been the education profession rather than its clients - the students. Attempt to "marry" traditional academic and traditional vocational or technical streams of education have been, for the most part, abortive. The traditional academic stream continues to be the road to maximum power of choice and to the professions.

I. The third major field of education - that of part time adult or continuing education, can be criticized as providing illusory benefits to people. On the one hand, it can be viewed as providing for people whose life chances have already been firmly defined and limited by their early childhood circumstances, activities that resemble those of more privileged people - thus providing a placebo for the general population - in Alex Comfort's words, "... casting artificial pearls before genuine swine."

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On the other hand, the promise of adult and continuing education in overcoming educational deficiencies, and in enhancing the chances of individual influence over lifestyle and socioeconomic conditions simply does not bear examination. The actual number of people whose lives are significantly changed through involvement in programs of part time education is small to the vanishing point, and would not withstand cost benefit analysis. The fact that individuals have used the adult education system to change their lives does not necessarily refute this argument. In a "front end loaded" system, where education is clumped at the beginning of life, the dice are loaded strongly and permanently against those who try to change position after the initial entry to the work force. Adult education is this context acts as a sop to the many and an opportunity to the few highly talented and energetic people who, it might be argued, by the sheer force of their talent might "make it" anyway.

In summary then, critics of the present system of education argue that its expansion has benefited mostly educators who have had larger empires within which to work and have careers, and who have had larger numbers of people for longer periods of time within their jurisdiction.

From this frame of reference, the relative inequalities based on social and economic position at birth have remained quite stable, but the expansion of the total system has resulted in a number of deleterious effects - institutionalization of students, alienation at the inter-generational level, increased expectations and levels of frustration, and a blocking of the young from the work force at a time of life when their validation as young adults through work is of extraordinary importance to them and to their society.

From this standpoint, it would only be mildly overstating the case to say that expansion of the secondary school system has vastly increased the proportion of young people ill-equipped to earn a living or even to find employment. In previous generations this was characteristic only of those destined for university programs of study.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF A MORE EQUITABLE EDUCATION SYSTEM:

To the degree that the previous remarks have general validity, characteristics of a more equitable system would include the following:

A. The basic education or elementary education level of the public school system would heavily emphasize a common platform or level of accomplishment, based on mastery learning, thus ensuring that at the completion of this level, all children have achieved a common base of competency. At this level, resources would be focussed on assisting children to reach the common level of adequacy. This would mean a deliberate system of "handicapping" or in American terms "affirmative action" in order to provide to all students a base for further development.

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B. The present secondary school system would be restructured to provide to all students job entry skills in some field of endeavor. In addition, the total curriculum would be shortened so as to allow all students at age sixteen the opportunity to leave school with dignity and employability.

C. Access to further secondary or higher education would have to be guaranteed to the individual at later stages of his/her life cycle - an "educational drawing account". Academic and occupational education of any description would be segmented into small enough units and be clearly enough described in content and behavior that it would be practicable for individuals to engage in training and education at any stage of the life cycle and also to receive recognition for learning achieved outside the formal educational system.

D. A concomitant of this pattern of education would be a shift within secondary schools and institutions of higher education to a heavy emphasis on counselling services, life planning services, and assistance to students of a wide age range. Long programs of study would be examined carefully, in most cases broken up, "laddered", and in many cases ruthlessly truncated.

E. Curricular design, content, and teaching methodology would have to be designed in consultation with a wide range of different interest, age, and social groups because of the increased variety of students.

It could well be noted by anyone familiar with the adult education enterprise in North America that these characteristics are those of adult and continuing education programs of study when operating to a maximum level of student satisfaction. That is, they are segmented, accessible and diversified programs of study, developed in close consultation with student groups.

SOME IMPLICATIONS:

Such a system of education would indeed link up the three main streams of education that to date have uneasily co-existed or competed - "academic/professional", "vocational/technical", "adult/social". These different systems would be linked into one system within which the individual would preserve at least some choice and significant access throughout life.

It is a concept that can be viewed both as a process and a goal. It can be applied to our existing education system which already contains many components of a system of Recurrent Education. Progress in the direction of a total system of Recurrent Education promises an increase of equity - the treatment of everyone in society as a growing and changing person with future potential rather than as somebody who is stereotyped as a worker, professional, or retired person subsequent to leaving school.

Two example of economical and easily administered advances in this direction in British Columbia could be a guarantee of tuition-free access to 12 years of elementary and secondary school education to the total population, and unlimited tuition-free education to all those over age 65.

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The implementation of such a system would force a fairly continuous shake-up in the world of work because of the coming and going of workers at all levels. This would imply a decrease in the "locked-in" nature of the relationship between employees and employers. The social implication of this fact would be that workers at all levels would have to have something like the same guarantees of employment upon return from education that are presently the prerogative of the professions, who, by-and-large, have developed quite effective systems of Recurrent Education for themselves - most notably in the field of education. Social pressures would also be eased through increased "lateral mobility".

To the degree that a system of Recurrent Education would provide maximum mobility to the adult, a radical change in the nature of social support services and union and labour management contracts would have to occur in the direction of complete portability of social support services. Presumably, this would come about through the gradual transfer to the Provincial and Federal Governments of services currently negotiated within industry and this would therefore argue an increase in the role of government.

Another implication would be that the relationship of the union to workers within the union would change, in that a system of Recurrent Education would have to allow for mobility of workers between and outside of unions as well as within union ranks. It should be noted that this is in direct contradiction to trends within most advanced industrial nations. The most extreme current example is Japan, wherein a worker has forfeited nearly all mobility between industries in exchange for almost complete security within one.

Costs of operating a total system of Recurrent Education would probably be higher than operating the existing system even if the period of socially prescribed early schooling was shortened, and the number of young students reduced. Elaborated and individualized services for adults and support for their families, would increase direct costs per student greatly. Perceived benefits and satisfactions would hypothetically be much greater.

THREE MAJOR PROBLEMS:

Granting the attractiveness and the relevance of the notion of Recurrent Education, and accepting the fact that in one form or another, we seem to be moving toward implementing parts of a system of Recurrent Education, three major problems of the concept must be recognized.

FIRSTLY, implementation of a total system of Recurrent Education would run in direct contradiction to the existing inertia in the fields of education and employment. Forces powerful enough to change radically as unwieldy a structure as publicly funded education and selection practices in industry would have to be virtually revolutionary in scope and power, but the appeal of this concept is its <u>evolutionary gradualism</u> - the possibility of modifying and shaping present policies and expenditures towards greater equity and appropriateness for the individual.

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SECONDLY, a rigorous implementation of the notion of equity would necessarily imply either a "lottery" system operating at the end of the compulsory level of schooling which would define those who leave for work and possibly later return versus those who would continue on to further education; or the mandatory removal of all students for a period of time to the world of work, by which time presumably all students would have matured sufficiently to understand the nature of the world well enough to make appropriate decisions for their own lives.

It is interesting to note at this point that those societies which have verbalized extreme dedication to the notion of social equity - those of the communist world - are precisely those who have attempted at one time or another to provide for a forced "return" to the land for students. Among the "Western" States, until recently, access to higher education in Israel was the result of selection by one's peers in the Kibbutz.

THIRDLY, a careful examination of the notion of Recurrent Education indicates that it suffers from the same lack of conceptual or practical limits as our present philosophy of public education. That is, the entire system of Recurrent Education is based on an unstated assumption that only a limited number of people will use the system, or that everybody will use the system, but only to a limited extent. We have already found with our existing system of education, especially since the development of the easily accessible community college, that these assumptions can no longer be made. It is obvious that some form of limit must be made to the commitment of the society to the individual. Ultimately, therefore, the decisions regarding limits on, or accessibility to, education will continue to be made either overtly or in disguised forms for the individual.

At present, the controls operate invisibly and differentially as social constraints that are not felt as such by the individual. They continue to be described by our sociologists and social psychologists.

A clear, formalized system of Recurrent Education would also imply clear, formalized processes and criteria of access to education. In whatever form, these would be open <u>social controls</u>. Our society would treat such open controls of the individual (and especially of his/her child) as unacceptable, if not revolutionary.

In summary, our society probably would find the <u>myth</u> of equity easier to handle than the discomfort of its actuality.

A CRITICISM FROM THE "NICKEL SEAT":

Recurrent Education impels, by its claim to be an organizing principle for all public education, the inclusion of all forms of education. Therefore, anything not carried on within such a system would have to be viewed as not being education and therefore not deserving of public support. Adult Education as many know it represents those forms of learning that are least "manageable" -- least easily institutionalized - least containable within categories.

Recurrent Education is a concept of great significance to elementary and secondary school systems, and higher academic and occupational education of all types - whether it be in universities, vocational schools, colleges or in the working environment. However, the concept does not seem to be readily

adaptable to the social and cultural framework of adult needs, because in the last analysis, it is a unitary system based on the assumption of public finance (to include everyone in the system, everyone has to be financed). Such a system must face the problem of priorities, and the costs implied in a system of Recurrent Education for the support of the adult student and his/her family are such that public policy will inevitably lean toward economic return and emphasis on that kind of cost benefit analysis. In spite of the ideal of total individual development, the increased opportunity would mostly, if not entirely, be related to the world of work.

Once more, given a system of Recurrent Education, a need would be apparent - a need for a system "outside" the regular system, catering to the individual needs not provided for by the "regular" system, and fuelled by student fees and the willingness to sacrifice money and time. Sound familiar?

AN ASSESSMENT:

Recurrent Education is an idea whose time has come. Evidences of this lie on every hand. The cry for a return to clearer standards of competency at the elementary school level; the expansion and diversification of the secondary school into the extended day and adult education context; the linking up of pre-apprenticeship programs on a collaborative basis between the Departments of Labour, school districts, and the community colleges; the increasing amount of laddering and segmentation of occupational curricula; the re-examination within the universities of assumptions of prerequisites; and the development of the community college as an institution with its varied programs and recognition of adult competencies, are all powerful indicators that many elements of a system of Recurrent Education are already with us and can do nothing but continue to develop.

Because we are a wealthy, conservative socity, it is not likely that the truly revolutionary idea which lies at the heart of the notion of Recurrent Education - that of true equity through truly equalized opportunity will come into being within our time. To bring this about would require a level of control over children and young people that most parents would violently resist - especially those parents who see most clearly the connection between schooling and life chances.

It is most likely that implementation of a system of Recurrent Education within this Province, or within Canada, will result in somewhat enhanced opportunities for job mobility and a healthier change of pace and alternation of life activities for many people. It will provide for a healthier degree of transfer between industries and fields of work. It may prove to be of considerable assistance to house-bound women who also have the right to the change and development that is now taken as a matter of course by most unions as a right of their members.

However, in terms of general access to positions of social influence and power the race will continue to be not to the potentially swiftest, but to those best placed on the track at the beginning of the race.